

## His Final Mission

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*(This is purely a work of fiction. Any resemblance with any real person or incident is a mere coincidence.)*

Cabinet minister Sharma's cavalcade was moving through a hilly terrain above a picturesque valley. The entourage had the usual protective coverage of a group of combat-trained commandos, a posse of policemen and an ambulance. The VIP was on his way to an important election rally in the nearby tribal area. Of late, Sharma's reputation had taken a beating due to his alleged involvement in a scam of illegal usurpation of tribal lands. It took considerable efforts before he could finally get off the hook. The trip was a follow-up, for political damage control.

As the minister's bullet-proof car was negotiating a sharp bend, there were a couple of barely audible sounds, like the pops from the opening of soda water bottles. The experienced driver of Sharma immediately knew he had flats. But before he could regain control, the car traveled straight to take a five hundred feet plunge into the ravine, as the guards and the medics watched helplessly.

On a cliff a few hundred feet away and from under the cover of thickets, a man spat derisively and packed his rifle and kits with a smug smile. "Indian Cabinet minister died of unfortunate road accident", he could imagine the immediate news flash. If they would ever find those two small bullet holes in the tires, by then he would be hundreds of miles away.

Mohan Kumar, a super hit film director of Mumbai was on a clandestine rendezvous with Sultan Khan, a film financier. It was an open secret that Sultan was a Dubai-based mafia leader, while Mohan was recently in a jam in a 'casting couch' scandal. An aspiring actress had sued him for forcing her regularly to bed, with the false promise of giving her a role. Mohan's lawyers, however, had convincingly established that she was just a cheap tart. Thus disgraced, she had taken her own life. Or so it was reported.

They met in a pub, controlled by Sultan's gang, to discuss their next mega production. But presently they were talking about something else in a hush-hush manner. "I do your bidding. But don't you think it was a bit too harsh to her?" Sultan said.

"No, no, dear friend – I heard she was going to engage a contract killer to bump me off," Mohan argued.

Suddenly a waiter tiptoed in and whispered something to Sultan.

"Oh no, it's those goddamned policemen again, searching for drugs and whores!" Sultan yawned.

Mohan paled. Assuring him, Sultan said, "Sit tight while I settle it. It's just a matter of routine pay-offs."

"But this is the most awkward moment for us to be spotted together by the police. It'll start the rumor mills rolling about her – yep – suicide!"

Sultan pondered and then said, “Well, there’s a backdoor. Take it and hit the alley behind. Tell your driver to wait near the ‘Safari’ restaurant; that’s just a stone’s throw away.”

Mohan called his driver and the private bodyguards on mobile phone and instructed them accordingly.

As he emerged from the dark back alley and headed towards his vehicle, a hit-an-run car mowed him down. “Filthy rat!” The man on the wheel uttered spitefully, as the car sped away before anybody took note.

Sanjay Khurana, a noted industrialist, was on his way to inaugurate his ambitious venture of a beverage plant in the hinterland of a North Indian province. Few months earlier, he was embroiled in a controversy when one of his companies was declared bankrupt. Thousands lost their jobs and millions their investments. Rumor was that he himself had engineered the bankruptcy by secretly siphoning off the company’s assets through a phantom company. After few months of trials and tribulations he walked out scot-free, widely believed to be due to his strong connections at the corridors of power.

The proposed site was easily approachable by road. But apprehending violent public demonstrations or even threats to his life, Khurana had decided to play it safe and fly by a helicopter. A make-shift helipad had been prepared for the purpose. As his helicopter was hovering before touchdown, he dreamily envisioned a huge complex with gigantic distilling towers sprouting up within the barren fields and the meadows that lay below.

On the ground, there were dozens of policemen and private security guards ensuring foolproof safety for the head honcho. Every single person around was frisked umpteen times, every square inch of ground was scanned with explosive detectors and only the very few trusted ones were allowed to go near the helipad. The moment the big boss would land, this ‘inner core’ would form a human shield to escort him to the inauguration venue through a ramp that was extended up to the helipad.

Just before the touchdown and with all eyes on the helicopter, an odd security man looked back and screamed, as he saw that an empty police van parked just above the ramp had started off accidentally. Before anybody could react the massive vehicle rolled down the cleared ramp, gathered speed with every passing moment and hit the chopper seconds before its landing. The oil tank, a gigantic explosive in wait, went off immediately.

Minutes later a siren-wailing ambulance darted out of the complex with a few mangled bodies towards the nearest hospital – not with much optimism, but as a mere formality. In the mêlée none could have bothered to check the credentials of the mask-wearing medical staff who were accompanying. It was only after a good half an hour that the police would throw a cordon around the site and start grilling the temporary workers to find out if there could be a human hand behind this odd mishap.

By then a member of the medical team would quietly disappear amid the hospital crowd and whisper from a nearby payphone booth, “Mission nine – successfully accomplished”.

Intelligence officer Dhillon was thoughtfully looking into a file. Several VIPs had died of accidents in rather mysterious circumstances within the last couple of years. The preliminary investigations had never suggested foul play, but the files were nevertheless passed on to the intelligence department for routine clearance. An alert deputy had collated several such cases into a master file and had forwarded it to the boss.

Dhillon had conducted an independent probe. While some of the cases were evidently stray incidents, a few others raised suspicions. Well aware of the histories of the deceased, Dhillon could guess they had personal enemies. He didn't mind pursuing a few cases further from contract killing angle.

But he was not inclined to buy the theory of a serial killer. What was missing was a common motive. Neither did the things fit into the patterns of any of the religious or political extremist groups under the intelligence scanner. Anyway, such gangs invariably boast of their 'exploits'.

"If there is a hand behind all these, it has to be His invisible hand!" He mused, with a snicker.

Well, not exactly! The invisible hand behind nearly a dozen such apparently disjointed events was of Nano, the leader of a deeply underground formation. No political or religious fanatic, the sole obsession of the leader and his foot soldiers was to 'deliver justice'. With profound anguish they had observed that many named and famed ones in the society were essentially criminals who make their ranks and fortunes by inflicting death and untold sufferings to the innocent. But the long arm of justice falls short of them, thanks to their money, power and muscle. It stirred the conscience of those excessively self-righteous people so much that they had taken upon themselves the task of delivering 'quick justice' through their chosen method.

Nano was their undisputed 'commander'. His innovative schemes could always make a mockery of the best laid protections. His superb information gathering network penetrated even the police and the intelligence. But most astounding was his time management, both at the macro and the micro levels. It earned him his nickname from the mates who would like to believe that his planning and executions were accurate to a nanosecond. They often wondered if this mystery man was an ex-commando.

Although having a bunch of followers not averse to die for their cause, the commander, however, never planned any suicidal mission. "We are very few and should spare no efforts to preserve ourselves", he would aver. He would undertake an action only after ensuring its success and doubly ensuring the safe exit of the operatives. Thanks to his computer-like precision, they had hardly any casualty so far. Opting for safety over fame, Nano would cover up their actions as 'accidents' – and well enough to confuse the best brains of the intelligence.

While suffering from no prick of conscience for eliminating their targets, Nano was not comfortable about the innocent lives lost in the bargain. Well, it's 'collateral damage'. That's

what the mighty nations call it, when they bomb the hospitals or schools of the hapless ones to smithereens! Try as you may, it can't be avoided altogether – the pigs seldom move alone!

No ideology, no mentor. But Nano often wondered if the man responsible for egging him on to this path of sin was his father, a modest but upright school teacher.

“Never lie,” he would tell Nano the child.

By the time he grew up, Nano realized that those who didn't lie had all died or were going to. The living ones are of two kinds – one who admit they lie and the others who don't.

“Poor old fool!” He would reminisce nostalgically of his late old man. “Didn't know you'll be skinned alive if you don't lie!”

So he lied left and right and without any scruples, as he wanted to survive. And survive he did! But the “poor old fool's” sermon had somehow left a permanent stamp on his disposition – he could never lie to himself!

And that made all the difference! It never allowed him to be normal – like everyone else!

But why are you riding the bandwagon of hate only? Can't you love, man?

Well, didn't he? It was a blossoming bud, the best thing God could have thought of creating that had filled Nano's adolescent days with sweet fragrance.

She is no more. On a fateful evening and on her way back from college she just disappeared. Days later, her mangled body was recovered from a nearby ditch.

Completely shattered, Nano could keep himself going with only one mission in mind – to find out a name! With considerable trouble and risk, he did gather that. It was a dreaded gangster. He then just remembered the name – for years and years and till he became Nano!

That gangster is no more. It gives Nano a deep sense of satisfaction.

But does it give you peace?

Well, what's that? – He replies to himself after some hesitation.

But careful as Nano might be, justice had ultimately caught up with him too. An hour ago he had received his death sentence. Ironically, it was not a jurist, but a doctor who had delivered it.

Nano had a persistent swallowing problem with occasional vomiting. Being in the life he was in, he didn't bother to consult a doctor – until he couldn't help it. After the routine tests, the doctor had finally given the verdict – it was esophageal cancer, in an incurable stage. With the usual pep talks he had urged his patient to fight and hope for the best. But Nano knew what to know – that he had another six months.

Nano was sitting alone in his room, trying to reconcile himself with the suddenly changed reality. Well, everyone must die. But he loathed the idea of moaning and withering away helplessly while his precious life oozes out without serving a purpose and this was

troubling him more than the occasional shooting pains near the stomach. Restlessly he switched the light on and drew the newspaper close just for some diversion. And next his eyes were glued on a small news item. Slowly adrenalin started flowing in his veins again and the lips curled in a crooked sneer.

He had hit upon a plan. As death was unavoidable, he would rather like to take someone along with, up to the bottom of the hell perhaps. And who could fit the bill better than Veerendra Joshi, the most powerful and dreaded politician of the region? Joshi, one of the most loathsome leaders, had engineered killing of hundreds of innocents with the help of his police and henchmen to consolidate his political power. But despite all cries of human rights abuse and the uproars to remove him from the positions of power, he was rather tipped to become the next prime minister of India!

A news clip had just given Nano the idea to realize as ambitious a plan as ‘Mission Joshi’. It would be his final mission and for a change, it would be a suicidal one.

“There is only one life to live and only one life to die. Serve a cause with your body and soul.” A voice reverberated.

“With my body and soul, dad!” He said, as he looked passionately towards his splendid person that still bore no sign of the death brewing inside.

Nano was lying on a hospital bed. Drips of 5-FU and carboplatin were flowing through his veins like hot lava. He would have to withstand this unbearable agony for another few hours. This being his first chemo, his oncologist had urged him to stay for a couple of days more in the hospital.

And Nano couldn’t have asked for more. It was already on the news that Veerendra Joshi would come to inaugurate a new wing of the hospital the following day. Joshi – the worst possible enemy of humanity! Nano recalled the latest massacre his goons had orchestrated to terrorize people who wouldn’t vote for his party. It was widely reported that when a pregnant woman had rushed out of the slum his marauders had set on fire and begged for mercy, the heartless killers had jovially slit her womb open and pierced the fetus to death before throwing the mother back into the inferno.

It would be a pious act if he could exterminate the kingpin of those fiends.

He had meticulously made the plan. The deadly substances were smuggled in two parts – a liquid, in the guise of his chemo medicine and a paste, in his shaving cream tube. Independently they are as docile as face lotions, but together they can blow off a tank. After getting himself admitted to the hospital, he had made some swift but in depth reconnaissance. The politician’s convoy would pass through a well-guarded route. Even the windows and the balconies overhanging the route would for sure be manned by gun-wielding commandos. But ultimately the master schemer could find an Achilles’ heel in that apparently invincible security shield. It was a sewage chute.

It was effectively the cover for some sewage pipes, but had barely enough leeway inside for a maintenance man to squeeze through. It could be entered through the small doors at the toilet blocks. The base of the vertical chute was close to the VIP's route. He would get inside it at the appropriate moment, descend till the base and wait for the entourage to pass.

There was a hole in the chute at that point. While excellent for keeping watch, it was unfortunately not big enough for a bomb to pass. It was an ideal sniper's post. But smuggling a gun into the hospital through the tight vigilance of metal detectors was no easy feat. A gun anyway is useless against bullet-proof cars and vests.

So he must assemble and detonate the bomb inside the chute! It would disintegrate his still magnificent body instantaneously, but won't spare his target either. Joshi's car would pass within handshaking distance of the spot and Nano knew the strength of his explosive well – only an anti-missile vehicle could have taken it face on!

But the success of the whole operation was on precise timing. He had to assemble, shake and detonate the bomb in perfect synchronization with the passing of the fleet. Over and above, he had to choose the exact time for entering the chute. It couldn't be too early lest his absence might be detected or he could get suffocated in the confine. But too much delay would mean that the security men would take control of the passages and possibly the toilets too, thereby spoiling the show.

Like the umpteen times before, time was again his adversary. But the immaculate Nano was sure that like the umpteen times before he would prevail upon it in his final mission too.

Thank God – they never consider a cancer patient, a poor soul, a suspect. That's why he could smuggle in the deadly substances without any hassle and could roam around so freely to gather information. But shouldn't it be just the other way round? Isn't any person condemned to death a potential suicide bomber, willing to take with him someone he loathes?

On a second thought, he realized the fallacy. A condemned person would cherish every moment of the rest of his life and would ill afford to lose even a single breath. Wouldn't he himself like to spend the remaining days in the company of his dear ones or in some scenic and tranquil abode of Nature? But well – he was making a sacrifice, for a cause. Would anybody ever appreciate how much he was giving up?

He had never been in a hospital before and he realized that too soon. He was surprised that a number of ladies and kids were wearing head scarves.

"They are chemo patients. You too would lose your hairs." A nurse answered to his query. Then she assured, "But don't worry, it'll come back once the treatment is over."

"They're just kids! Will they be cured?" He asked, in childlike innocence.

"We try our best and let's leave the rest to Him." She said dispassionately.

But Nano couldn't be that stoic. He couldn't forget the kids with the head scarves even during the agony of his chemotherapy.

By early afternoon, he was through. He was feeling pathetic, but still tried some walk around. He had to be perfectly fit by the next morning.

He saw a beaming housewife next to her husband, a middle-aged man who seemed to be recovering. "Dr. Mehta is God!" She said with deep regard. "He had virtually no chance. But the doctor operated, applied radiation and after six months of battle, he is cured and will go home tomorrow."

"But I have a headache." The man said sheepishly.

"The doctor had done the tests. Don't worry – he will take care of it," the wife assured.

As Nano proceeded along the corridor, he heard a muffled cry, and saw a man in white coat trying desperately to control himself.

"Do you have a patient?" Nano sympathetically asked.

"I've a lot. I'm Dr. Mehta. That man – I've lost the battle for him! Today I knew that the malignancy had reached his brain. How'll I inform the wife?"

Nano couldn't speak and just put a consoling hand on the doctor's shoulder.

Later in the evening, he once again heard some sobbing – an uncontrolled one this time, from a woman. He silently gestured a nurse who said, "Her son had swallowed twenty sleeping pills two days before and now he is –"

"Dead?" He asked with bated breath.

"Out of danger", the nurse smiled, "thanks to Dr. Desai and Dr. Prakash. The lady didn't shed a drop of tear for the last two days. Now she can't control herself anymore!"

Night fell. Trying for an early sleep, Nano tossed restlessly on his bed. It was his last day and it turned out to be a handful. First it was the hell of that chemotherapy that nearly consumed all his grit and determination. Then, it's this blessed hospital and the environs.

A fish out of water – that's how he felt!

He kills – and they save! All meticulous planning, dedicated efforts, heartfelt emotions here center around life and not death!

Not that he was ashamed for a moment. He did challenge the writs of man and God – but for the sake of justice. At the end of the day he could face himself without remorse and that's all that mattered.

But how he wished he could join forces with these people in white for a day! Pity – it's too late now!

As he looked into the dimly lit ward and the star-studded sky outside, he felt something strange oozing into his heart. Something he was familiar with in the long lost past – when he had family and love.

Peace? Why the hell is it tormenting him now in the eleventh hour – when the die had already been cast and when he was not destined to see another sunset?

They brought in a charred body, with several limbs blown off. The car driver! “Can you hold him for a moment while I fix the oxygen?” Dr. Mehta whispered to Nano, “He may still survive!”

“Sonny!” Now it was the anguished scream of his young mother. Shaken, he looked back to find that he had jumped on her lap with muck on his feet.

Nano jolted out of his sleep with beads of sweat all over. He must have had just a few winks, as it was only ten-o-clock. Reflexively he looked at his hands and feet and found them spotlessly clean.

He was clear to his conscience. He had lived his life for a cause and was going to die for one. Then why was he feeling restless and was being chased by the nightmares?

Body and soul for a cause – now there’s no going back from that! He affectionately caressed his flawless torso and the tanned limbs, possibly for the last time. Suddenly he was overwhelmed by an emotion he had hardly felt before.

With great efforts he regained composure. Time was running out and he had still things to do. Carefully examining the deadly chemicals in his possession, he ensured a safe separation. Next he silently inched towards the nearby public phone while avoiding the gaze of the duty nurse.

It was dawn. In the oncology ward a nurse was making her routine round before the shift change. Suddenly she screamed, as she saw a patient in a pool of blood with his wrist slit.

He was rushed to the ICU and after some frantic efforts was declared dead.

He had left a note, donating his body and the organs to the needy and had also left the contact numbers of the lawyers and the voluntary organizations to handle the procedures.

A shrewd manipulator of time, Nano was precise in choosing the moment in his final mission too. He was discovered when it was too late to save him but not too late to salvage his organs. He couldn’t have been more precise in choosing the date too. Another few days and the malignancy would have rendered the organs useless anyway.

“Poor soul – didn’t have the nerves to face an agonizing end,” lamented the doctor.

“But look at his face, doc.” The duty nurse murmured, “Didn’t he die in peace?”